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The River of Blood: An analysis of the process and production of FURY and the Senior Theater Festival INFERNO

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THE RIVER OF BLOOD:

An analysis of the process and production of FURY and the Senior Theater Festival INFERNO

A Senior Project submitted to
The Division of the Arts

by
Aleah Willa Black

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2016

Dedicated to my parents, Brenda and Ian Black, who gave me the irreplaceable gifts of my education and my sense of humor. Thank you for teaching me to always try to make the world better and kinder.

A thousand thanks to my incredible cast and collaborators:

Brigid Boll, Sam Harmann, Miles Messinger, Aniya Picou, Elise Alexander, Evan Cromett, Lily Cummings, Jared Hester, Isabel Bennett, Franchesca Chorengel, Ariel Gillooly, Amanda Houser, Alex Koditschek, Avalon Qian, and especially Cullan Powers.

Thank you to my professors, board members, and advisors over the years, especially Jean Wagner and Chiori Miyagawa.

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Thank you to my incredible extended family for teaching me that art is for everyone.

Thank you to my brother Keegan, for teaching me to laugh at myself.

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ANGER CONTAINS SO MUCH LOVE:

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A GUIDING QUESTION or I Don't Need You To Like This Paper

"The point of the essay is to change things."

—Edward Tufte

A few nights before our senior project went up in the LUMA theater, Mikey Gray and I found ourselves scrubbing mold and long dead spiders out of an antique toilet. And while cleaning a toilet in a utility closet, maniacally happy that you managed to get it for free, is a decent anecdote about the absurdity of theater, it also reminds me of some of the very important lessons I have learned here at Bard. In the words of Amy Trompeter, "Theater is a day laborer's job." There is something immediate in what a good artist is creating; the work is gritty and essential. Good, valuable theater straddles the impossible balance of doing what must be done, while not relegating itself to the realm of religion. That is to say, theater holds the truth that one can find in religion, but has the power to shed religious dogma. Good theater is practical and impractical. Potent and impotent. Necessary and silly. It has the power to be both concrete action and impossible magic. It is one of the few places in my life I have ever seen real change happen. And as the daughter in a long chain of idealists, it seems that political, inclusive, naive, bombastic theater is the inevitable choice of "What I Am Going To Do With My Life."

So, if theater is all that (A vessel for change! A means of truthful communication!) how does one go about ever actually making anything? And when one does make something (a senior project for example) should not the art stand alone without a long winded explanation of style and process? How do I compact my process as an artist, my historical context, the journey of my senior project, and my identity going forward, into one paper? It also seems that if this essay is to be an effective critique of my own work, it should attempt to distance itself from the type of thinking and art making I work against in my own theater making. This will be an attempt to write a paper that does not feed into a culture of cold,

hyper-intellectual, ironic, or manipulative art. I think a big part of being an artist is finding a balance; how does one be critical and rigorous, yet forgiving and non-precious?

Perhaps this essay can attempt to do what I as an artist attempt to do: say something with complexity, earnestness, honesty, compassion, and an irreverence for the powers that be. I hope to say something truthful, but then let it go, and remember that my truth will certainly be different 6 months from now, and 6 years from now. I hope to make this with as much appreciation as possible for all that Bard has given me, while also letting go of my desire for you to like me, the paper, or my work. I hope to make this an essay that helps me grow as a person and helps the department that has been my home grow as well. In the eternal words of Bread & Puppet Theater, “Courage! Yes!”

**A HYPOTHESIS or
Art as a Scientific Process
My Inspirations are MY Tools**

“In my view, the great and complicated things that go on in the world cannot be adequately recognized by people who do not use every possible aid to understanding.”
—Bertolt Brecht, “Brecht on Theatre”

Science is not perfect. Our western version of science was made by rich white men who created and perpetuated infinite myths of “natural laws” (like my sexuality and my gender, for example). That said, the scientific *method* is one of the most pure processes that exists. The scientific method allows for questioning the very fabric of understanding, and then actually doing something with that question. A hypothesis is formed, and then you create round after round of experiment. You try to draw conclusions. You do not treat each experiment as the be-all and end-all of your career, or the one piece of research that will change the world. The worth of science is based in its ability to make micro-discoveries, micro-changes, until the world is better. It is always about asking a question that you do not know how to

answer. It is about having the boldness to question the laws of the universe, or the norms of human understanding. Audacity and humility hand in hand¹.

I use the scientific method as the structural grounding of the real work of my art, which tends to be densely emotional. My grandmother describes me as an empath: the emotional equivalent of a telepath. And if we are to believe her, this means that I have very little filter for the emotions of the people around me. I have the tendency to give as much as I can, sometimes past what I realistically should. It also means that I had to go through the long process of not being so sensitive. I have learned to not take things so personally and not worry about others' opinions of me so much. This combination of the scientific process as form, and the ship of emotional cargo I am constantly hauling as content, has been the main engine for my art in my time at Bard, and thus my senior project.

I did not come to theater at Bard from a theater heavy background. I did make lots of music before Bard and am the spawn of two intensely creative and artistic people, but theater was a vast and seemingly impenetrable world before I came here. My parents are the first in their families to attend college, and were necessitated by their lives to not prioritize art as their living/ their life. And while I sometimes mourn that my dad never got to keep writing poems and my mom can't be a potter full time, I love and appreciate being raised by a doctor and a physical therapist. It means that I grew up around an extended family who have little or no arts education or exposure. It matters so much to me to create art that is legible and accessible to people who have been historically excluded from the arts scene. My parents' legacy of being highly artistic people while also medical professionals is in great part from where my artistic process originates. They exemplify a synthesis of art and the science.

¹ I had many reasons to stop pursuing science as a major at Bard. One of the main ones was that the creation of art is possible without a huge budget, therefor can be created on the edges of capitalism. It has the power to indict and critique those with money. Science, while pure in theory, is actually very constrained by the whims of the wealthy. The research projects that get researched are the ones that funders will back. You can make art without a theater, but it is so hard to do science without a lab.

In my 1-2 page artist's statement, I have listed several of my artistic influences, both in terms of style and inspiring artists. Martha Graham has been a huge influence in my sense of narrative and effective spectacle. Studying Meisner Technique has helped me refine what I believe in about acting and why I find Stanislavsky to be ungainly and cumbersome while actually performing (though neat and pretty on the page). The performance art of Yoko Ono has driven me toward mess and poetic text. The work of Aaron Landsman and Bread & Puppet have helped me decide what kind of artist I want to be and how politics can be beautiful². Yet my art should stand on its own without your knowledge of my influences or intentions. I should be able to show my art to someone who has never had the privilege of lots of art exposure and it should still be meaningful. My art should not be coded only for artists. If I am effective as a creator, my knowledge of those who came before me should be visible to those in the audience educated in the arts, without making the non-arts educated part of the audience feel excluded. I do not believe in creating exclusionary or entirely referential art³. The scientific process is not based on following the school of thought of one thinker and but on the division of thought that the process falls under. In the same way my art should exist within a framework but the watcher should not have to know my lineage to glean something from the art.

I am frustrated by the amount of insider art at this school, within my class of seniors, and within myself. I do not believe that every piece of art has to be explicitly revolutionary or political, yet I also

² This list of artists is just a surface level scratch, and it doesn't include all of the poets, and sculptors, and musicians who have changed me. Nor does it include the activist groups on campus that have inspired me, nor the Bard Prison Initiative students who I tutor and have taught me so much. I believe a good artist takes inspiration from everything in their life, and not just the arts world.

³ I certainly do not mean to say there isn't room for exclusion in art. If art is a mirror for our existence, then pain, loneliness, and exclusion are certainly important in our daily lives and deserve examination and reflection. But there is a huge difference between creating art that is about exclusion/presents exclusion/shows exclusion and art that is exclusive. Art that shows exclusion can be critical of the society we live in and create the space for the audience to lean in; exclusion can be a brilliant tool to create mystery, which is an effective way to help an audience stay engaged. By contrast, exclusive art is a piece of work that is created using the language of past artists in a way that is witty or feels good to be in on, while not actually offering much of value in terms of content. These are plays that I have seen that pride themselves in being "liberal," since they are attended by a liberal audience, but actually do little except reinforce the preexisting class structures and capitalist morals that are the foundation of our theater system. This comes down to my deep belief that who you are making art for and why you are making art are essential questions. In short, art is an inherently political act, and it is easy to make art on the side of the oppressors.

know that everything I do and make exists within a predetermined socioeconomic structure. How do we create art that straddles that contradiction? I will certainly steal the tools and processes and images of artists that came before me, but I want to see them as experimenters and not as prophets. If I can learn to look at artists as people who question the world, and not as things I must replicate, it sets me up to be a non-competitive person. I can learn to take their ideas and ask the next logical question based on that work, instead of making art that is only about art or other artists. I am interested in continuing the tradition of folk art, not Bread & Puppet. I am interested in continuing the tradition of magic, not Geoff Sobel. I'm interested in continuing the tradition of interdivisional work, not John Kelly, etc⁴. The artists in my world are my teachers and my compatriots; they are not my priests or my competition. I want to make art that has a hypothesis and not a conclusion. In the same way, I am trying to write a paper that is a question. A question that will lead to the next question and the next.

**AN ASIDE or
Who Is This For?**

“How do we perform power, and who gets to play which roles?”
—Aaron Landsman

Who am I writing this paper for? Is it for Leon Botstein, to prove that my work as theater major has been complete and rigorous enough to warrant being allowed to graduate? Is it for the Theater & Performance department, to explain the process of creating a senior project so that they can make the process more cohesive, artistic, or kind for the next classes of students? Is it for my professors, so they can look at my progress and feel proud? Is it for the future students of the department, so that they can read my manicured thoughts and determine what they want to eschew or emulate in their own journeys?

⁴ This is not at all to discredit the importance of singular artists and the unique way that they influence the world. Focusing only on style or theme doesn't do justice to the people that are innovators in interdisciplinary fields. Art is a place where the very concept of “the individual” can be critiqued and celebrated. The distinction I am making is solely to help myself understand in what ways I want to challenge some of the norms of our arts community in my own work. I do not want to emulate specific artists, but I do find it important to recognize the way specific artists have shaped me or the art world around them.

Is it for my current self, so that I can move forward with the processed knowledge of what I have made at Bard? Is it for my future self, so that I can look back on myself and laugh nostalgically at my optimism and cluelessness? Is it for no one but the algorithm of the institution, a simple box to be checked on the list of tasks to allow me to graduate? If I quit Bard now, would it appear on paper as if I had done nothing, learned nothing? Is this paper the final hoop for me to jump through, so I can write “Bard College Graduate” at the top of my resume and feel like the hundreds of thousands of dollars my family has paid for me to go here were, indeed, truly worth it?

**GATHERING TESTABLE PREDICTIONS or
Finding the Shape of Things
Speaking of Being Angry**

“The master said You must write what you see./ But what I see does not move me./ The master answered Change what you see.”

—Louise Gluck, “Vita Nova”

I’ve made a lot of plays for someone my age. I wrote and directed a folk musical my sophomore year, a new Greek-ish tragedy my Junior year, and an interview based play about rape the fall of my Senior year. I then produced that play professionally in New York City the spring of my senior year. I have acted in an average of 2 plays a semester here. I have brought a performance to every to Zocalo I have physically been able to attend, and orchestrated performance art pieces and installation pieces and traveling guerilla art all over campus. I have taken many classes outside this division and I am a spanish tutor for the Bard Prison Initiative. I was a peer counselor for two years. I am an active protester and activist on campus. I am in two bands at Bard and have written three full length poetry chapbooks. I have started a herbalist business and now sell homemade remedies and teach herbalism classes locally. I have learned costume design, metal working, lighting design, stage managing, and props design all through my collaborative projects on campus, and have managed to still be an active part of the arts scene outside of theater at Bard as a result. All of this is to say, senior project only goes so far.

There is a toxic mentality within the student body at Bard surrounding SPROJ⁵. The fear and loathing of senior project seeps down into the bones of we fourth year students; many of my friends lost their personalities for large swaths of time this year, stumbling out of the library like vague ghosts that have wandered too far from familiar ground. To create a project that summarizes all that one is, believes in, and can make is an impossible task. Yet this that is exactly what the stakes of a senior project feel like. I have been both lucky and motivated enough to create a large body of work, and a stable identity outside of my status as an artist, before my senior year. Because of that, I feel like I managed some iota of grace in the creation of my senior project. The process was by no means perfect, but I am proud that I made art that I found value in, while also maintaining my status as human throughout. And more importantly, I am proud that (though I had very high expectations of them) I treated my cast and collaborators with gentleness and respect⁶. While the circle of hell we chose to explore was anger, we managed to create a process that was very much about fun, joy, and love.

As for my collaborators, I could not have been more lucky that Mikey and Cullen wanted to work with me. Mikey Gray is an incredible collaborator, person, artist, and friend. I could write this twenty 20 page paper entirely about her merits. She is such a versatile actor and human being, and I hope her career reflects the deep passion and talent she has for artmaking. Working with her was one of my favorite parts of the year and one of my favorite parts of my Bard experience. Cullen Powers is an incredible human being and I am so glad that I got to work with him and that he was a part of the process. It was really hard when he decided to step down as a co-director, but it meant that he had more energy and love to give to

⁵ Perhaps the most worst acronym of all time.

⁶ This is something I wish I saw more of at Bard. I was lucky enough to have role-model student directors here that demonstrated prioritizing the health of the cast. Based on my knowledge of other projects through my cast members and my closest friends, many department shows and student directed shows have had directors that would let the process eat the actors up in the name of “The Play.” Without even going into how fundamentally wrong it is to abuse a cast’s time or trust, it doesn’t take into account the very immediate and logical gap that is the mistreatment of theater artists; hurting or straining or dismissing your actor’s mental and physical health in the name of “The Play” is absurd. The people ARE the play. Forcing fulltime students to rehearse for hours and hours and hours everyday is not in the name of good art; it is in the name of ego, power, or paranoia. Forcing human beings to delve into really hard, personal, or violent memories/sensations without giving them the space to process or a way to keep them safe is not morally sound, let alone artistically fertile. The people ARE the play!

both my Sproj and his own. It was a challenging conversation when he told Mikey and I that he would be stepping down, but I respect him so much for it and genuinely look up to him and his thought process as an artist. I hope I get to work with both of these people again.

Mikey, Cullen, and I chose an amazing cast of actors, and though a few had to drop out over the course of the process, they did so out of respect for us and over booked schedules. I am really excited and inspired by the balance my cast and I found between devising and script writing. It felt like the show was generated through a positive feedback loop of material that our cast made, and written text based on that material. I would love to find more opportunities to work with a devising structure similar to the one we created in this process. It felt like a fun and equitable way to both hear the voice of all members of a large cast, while maintaining focus and leadership within the group. It was especially fruitful because it helped broaden my experience of what devised material can be⁷. To begin discovering in our rehearsals the power and fun of a devising structure that actually worked for me was a breakthrough and will be something that I continue to explore as a director.

FURY₂ the show that we all created together, was based on a few guiding questions about Anger we asked at the beginning of this year. What is the value of anger? Is anger generative, destructive, both? What happens when you swallow anger? While there are of course things I would do differently if I rewrote or restaged this project now, I think FURY was a great first production of a new script. We worked hard to pick a story that would be expansive and that would emotionally be carried out of the theater⁸. Yet we also worked hard to create a play with specificity. With only 25 minutes to fill, one of

⁷ I have loved devising in theory (and “Viewpoints” has been one of the most helpful tools I’ve been taught as a student) but frequently in actual rehearsal processes I found it so confusing. The playful and egalitarian method Geoff Sobelle taught us in Performance Making seemed so different from some of my lived experiences with devising outside of the classroom. I’ve been in situations where directors make actors go and create materials alone together for hours and claim it as their own. This forces actors into a position where they are doing the intellectual work of a director *and* the emotional work of an actor, without receiving support or credit.

⁸ Our play was also literally carried out of the theater. I’ve been thinking a lot recently about the Cycle Dramas Gideon Lester taught me about, as well as moving art. In the future, I am interested in working more with theater that happens outside of a theater. I have been trying out some small mobile performance and puppetry recently, and it is something I would like to continue pursuing as an artist.

our biggest goals was to not try to talk about too much, but to talk about one particular thing in depth. We discussed myth a lot when first starting the project, and I think that this is part of where our balance of specificity and epic scale, simplicity and spectacle, came from. This equilibrium created one of my favorite things about our project: while the plot of the work was tragic, the performance of it was filled with so much pleasure that we were frequently surprised when audience members expressed how intense they found it to be.

All of this is not to say that we created a perfect project. I don't think perfect art exists. We worked very hard but there were certainly things that I could have done better. Creating a project with two collaborators/co-directors and a large cast means that the process was near bursting with ideas and thoughts and inspirations from within. For me, trying to find balance within the artistic process and my fellow artists meant I had very little room in my brain for outside thought during the process. The structure of having a collaborative SPROJ meant that I was confused and overwhelmed at the prospect of having an outside advisor that would add another directorial voice to the process. I regret not utilizing the professors and my advisor, Jean Wagner, more during the rehearsal process. Having an experienced director give us feedback in early rehearsals could have been really informative, and Mikey and I definitely missed out on an educational opportunity. I do not think our project suffered too greatly because of this; we worked hard to advise and guide one another and let our cast be a guiding force in the project. That said, I have definitely learned from this process that I want to work at balancing time in a collaborative process, and balancing when, where, and from whom my co-directors and I are getting feedback.

I also would like to work on my ability to navigate larger collaborative structured like that of the INFERNO project as a whole. Some of the way that the other senior directors handled use of actors time, communication, etc. were challenging for me, and I don't think I ever quite found the right way to handle it. I know that there isn't just one right way to handle interpersonal relations, I only wish that I had found

a way that felt right to me. How does one try to mediate unnecessary conflict within a large group without getting walked on? How does one call out people that are not communicating kindly without tone-policing them? How does one balance calling actors for the time you need them, if you know that they are being called for 9 hour long rehearsals by other directors? And how does one be supportive of all members of a collaborative group that is in conflict, without being exclusionary or taking sides? These questions were pertinent all year and I am sure will continue to be so. But at the end of the day, my fellow seniors are truly brilliant artists and people; I think we all tried our best to navigate a complicated and large collective. Overall, I'm glad I was surrounded by people that challenged me. And while there were moments or relationships that I found difficult, this group has taught me a lot about being an artist, and I'm grateful.

I have much more to say about the flaws and successes of FURY. But as an artist, I believe my work should speak for itself⁹. As a Bardian, I have been told that my senior project should be enough of a demonstration of my individual efforts as a student that the piece should stand alone as evidence of my education. And while my play did speak for itself, it did not stand alone as evidence of my education. I should not have to write an essay as part of my artistic senior project. A twenty five minute project, devised and directed collaboratively, is not a large enough sample size to determine my flexibility as an artist, my capacity as a director, or my experience as a student. If it was, this essay would be superfluous. My project did not answer the main question of the senior project at Bard: what are the limits of what this student can do? I believe my senior project was an interesting, valuable play. My collaborators and I demonstrated as much as we could of our abilities given the time and resources allotted to us. But if the cumulative final project of my undergraduate degree, the partial topic of my board, and one of the final

⁹ If I could encapsulate my art in an essay, then there would be no reason to make art. The successes and flaws of my art can not be fully determined by me; the value of my art is constructed where the creation of the artist and the experience of the audience meet. Reading the Audience Reception Theory of Hans-Robert Jauss has impacted me on this topic.

determiners in my ability to graduate, is a single, collaborative, one-act play, then there is something flawed within the system.

In order to be both respectful of your continuing roles as leaders in this department, and maintain honesty and integrity within my work, I have attached a secondary essay before my appendix that addresses these concerns. Hopefully it will do what Miriam Felton-Dansky encouraged we seniors to do in a Zocalo a few weeks ago: ask rigorous questions and bring up issues we see within the structure of the project. I dearly hope you take the time to read it, as I have put a lot of love and thought into those critiques. The rest of this paper will be an artistic analysis of my work. Please feel free to read the second essay now in order to contextualize the rest of my paper, or save it for the end in order to not disrupt the flow of thoughts.

**AN EXPERIMENT or
Wild, Human / Narrative, Not**

“ ‘...But fix thine eyes beneath: **the river of blood/ Approaches, in the which all those are steep’d,/ Who have by violence injured.**’ *O blind lust!/ O foolish wrath!*”
—Dante Alighieri, “Inferno”

I have a distinct memory of sitting on the grass behind manor with Mikey and Cullen at the very beginning of the year. We journaled in our little black books and talked for hours about anger, its meaning in our lives, and our relationships with it. Mikey’s journals were full of thoughtful and clear notes and symbolic logic, Cullen’s with abstract shapes and evocative words or images, and mine with poems and sketches. Retroactively imagining those journals, it’s so clear as to why each of us took on the roles we did in the project. As we spoke that day, we talked about our attraction to the image of The River Styx in Dante’s Inferno. In our cantos, those who are being punished for anger exist within and on the banks of a river. Those who are angriest are on the muddy banks, beating each other to a pulp with bloody fists (wrath). The more you lose hope, passion, or fervor, the more you slide off the banks. Those souls sink

into the water, and the more they become apathetic, the deeper they descend into the petrifying, stinking river (sullenness).

Though the structure of our project went through many iterations, water imagery and the idea of a river stayed constant. This is great part was due to our interest in the idea of the natural and unnatural as guiding principles of the project. Themes of nature/machine, wild/human show up constantly in my art, and creating FURY solidified my desire to work with those themes more. I was especially interested in analyzing anger as something amoral, like a river, or a natural disaster. Frequently, anger is talked about as an inherently negative force— and while I feel that the human experience of anger is frequently tainted with emotions like shame and denial— the experience of anger itself is something that can be pure or constructive. Creation and destruction are almost always seen as incompatible concepts in our culture, but I was interested in the idea of creation and destruction as two sides to the same coin. A flood wrecks a city, but it also brings in a deluge of minerals and deposits that replenish the land and make it fertile. In this same way, the project was largely about anger as a constructive force, and that resistance against a natural and powerful internal force is what is actually terrible thing. Resistance to change and the transformative power of anger was the underlying current throughout our whole project.

While this theme took many months to grow and evolve, it never became the clean cut “message” of the play. A “moral tale” play that left no room for gray ideas and discussions wouldn’t have done justice to the dense ideas that we were addressing. Anger and hell are terrifying and huge concepts, so we worked hard to make the moral world of the play shakey. I think this came from a knowledge that, when fighting against large concepts, it can be easy to take a completely polar stance (completely in favor of the norm, or completely against it). We could have easily made a romantic play about the positive power of righteous anger, or a comedy about repressing anger in order to stay as far as we could from the standard plot of so many puritan tragedies: the dangers of giving into anger. Instead, we worked to create a play about anger as a force that you cannot constrain within moral limits, as neither purely good or bad. To do

so, we drew from an artistic vocabulary of comedy, romance, tragedy, farce, and many other seemingly incompatible forms.

Each section of FURY was based in an artistic form, blended and fused with other styles and forms. These sections allowed us to structure FURY as a cycle. This was just one of the ways we structured anger as a natural force, as constant as a tide. The three definite sections we broke the project into were Prelife, Life, and Death. This structural choice is I think part of the reason why the project felt cohesive to me. Many audience members said to Mikey and I that, though they could not always find a concrete plot within the play, it felt like the whole piece had a consistent thread. And with a project that was only 25 min long, having cohesion of topic and theme felt essential.

I would like to continue to make art that straddles this balance between narrative and non-narrative. Doing so does two helpful things for me as a creator. This form resembles (in some way) how I process the world. I do not necessarily always make narrative structure, but I certainly do make emotional structure. That is to say, I do not always need things to have a plot, but things almost always are part of a story for me. Structuring my art in this way refines my artistic voice, and also allows me the specificity of working from mental patterns that I find familiar¹⁰. I have also found this structure to be helpful in creating more inclusive work. Aaron Landsman once told me that artists frequently either assume too little of a non-arts educated audience (and treat them like children), or assume too much of a non-arts educated audience (and don't allow for any "ins" or ways for the audience to feel like this story is also for them). I think finding the balance between narrative and not makes my piece both modern and ancient, a place I frequently aim to be.

¹⁰ That said, I have also been working a lot recently in creating art that breaks my normal mental patterns. Learning to write in many ways, styles, and thought processes has been a constant goal of mine at Bard. I do not want to fall into the trap of thinking that (especially at such a young age) I have a set style in which I create my work. The more I can learn to fill up a tool box with diverse ways of making art, the more I can realize when comfortable patterns are useful and when new ideas are necessary.

**VARIABLE 1 or
Prelife, Heaven, the womb**

"Everyone who has ever built anywhere a 'new heaven' first found the power thereto in his own hell."
—Friedrich Nietzsche

At the very beginning of our piece, Mikey, Cullen, and I floated into into Luma on the shoulders of our cast. As a terrible version of "Also Sprach Zarathustra" began to play, the sixteen of us formed images of "The Creation of Adam" and a Pietà. The lights washed us in undulating blue tones and wales could be heard in the distance. It was absurd, and purposefully poking fun at how seriously we can take ourselves as artists. Part one was the portion of the cycle of anger when you find peace as your anger ebbs. It was the ability to laugh at one's past, and to see the ridiculousness, as well as the validity, of past rage. This part of the cycle of anger is necessary, otherwise it becomes too easy to avoid anger, conflict, and passion. A sense of humor is essential in order to process past anger and handle new anger.

**VARIABLE 2 or
Life, Earth, the home**

"You're on earth. There's no cure for that."
—Samuel Beckett, "Endgame"

Part two of the piece began with our domestic tableau: Mikey on a trampoline, me at the sink, and Cullen on the toilet. Because we were interested in symbolic gestures and creating a mythic space, we used only those three props as set pieces. By using recognizable text and characters stolen from naturalism, but creating an open and somewhat undefined physical space, we allowed ourselves room to make a specific story grounded in characters while not limiting them with all the constraints of traditional "kitchen sink" theater; we brought the audience into a recognizable theatrical world but because our set was so bare (and based in lighting cues as indicators of space/emotion) we were able to transport them into brand new realities. We had neither the logistical problem of moving sets, nor the mental problem of

confusing people (which would make them lose interest in following along with us). Being able to make jumps in space/time/world could have been very challenging in a short play. They were made possible for us by the simplicity of the physical space of “the house.” I think this was a good solution to having a small amount of storage space and transition time, and was an example of us using our constraints as creative fodder.

Part two was mostly a short scene between a mother, father, and child who were all boiling with anger but refusing to explode. Each character was based on one of the Furies in Dante’s *Inferno*: Megaera, Alecto, and Tisiphone. Megaera represents jealous anger, Alecto represents ceaseless rage, and Tisiphone represents righteous fury. In order to make the Furies’ entrance and presence something magical, we wrote a script for section two that was as American suburbia blasé as possible. In many ways, we were inditing how much unhappiness and anger is rooted deep within American cultural norms of hetero families, class structure, gender, whiteness, and capitalism. Part two was the denial portion of the project; the characters were trapped in a world where they felt no permission for their rage, and had no way to destroy the sources of the problems. Because of this, each character was an outlet for another character’s symptoms of anger, though none of them were the true source of each other’s pain.

**VARIABLE 3 or
Death, Hell, the river**

*But did you know/ that anger began as music, played/ too often and too loudly by drunken performers/
at weddings?”*

—Troy Jollimore, “On the Origins of Things”

Part three had a gradual beginning. As my character, Tiff, and Cullen’s character, Alex, began to slow dance to an old love song, the three Furies of Hell entered onto the stage. Each Fury was made up of a collection of bodies. These three sisters with hive brains became the driving force for the rest of the play. We decided that the Furies weren’t actually individual beings, but creatures that seduced people who possessed the type anger that was their life force. We figured out that they engulfed human beings like

fuel, so each Fury the audience saw was an ancient, multifaceted creature that lived through the collective brains of the humans it absorbed. The Furies entered the world of the play because Alex, Meggie, and Tiff (the father, mother, and child) exemplified the types of anger on which each Fury sustained itself.

In our smaller group rehearsals working with just one Fury, and the larger rehearsals working with the whole cast, we spend a long time talking about all of our relationships with the different Furies/types of anger. We began to determine a language for each Fury, which over time became a space that each inhabited¹¹. We realized that each Fury drags a world along with it, instead of being dragged through the world. Once we determined this, we began formulating the end of our script, in which the Furies attempt to absorb the family by bringing each family member into a Fury world. Both Megaera and Alex succumb— Megaera from a desire to be loved and have a place, Alex from a desire to be allowed out of his constant constraints— but Tiff never allows herself to be given over. She is so angry and, perhaps of the three, needs release the most. But her stubbornness and fear of her own emotions keep her from being able to give in. She cannot admit that she is angry, and her life becomes a living hell.

Obviously, Mikey and I knew that only some of this plot would be legible from the outside. But we decided to keep the plot and mythological references obscured in order to maintain mystery in the project. By having a clear plot and characters in our/our cast's heads, we were able to perform with enough specificity to make the play mysterious, and not just a mess. What actually carried the audience through the project was the emotional score of the show, which I believe depicted many recognizable and empathizable moments of anger. Both the desire to give into rage and the stubbornness to remain above it are states most people have lived through.

¹¹ Item 1 in my appendix is a chart that our cast drafted on a chalkboard one rehearsal that solidified some of the characteristics of each Fury. These characteristics were drawn from everything from our movement qualities in rehearsals to classical renaissance painting of the colors of the Furies.

**REPLICATION or
The Cycle of Anger or
Carry It With You**

“Hail nothing/ The infernal/ Is a slippering wetness out at the horizon./ Hell is this:/ The lack of anything but the eternal to look at/ The expansiveness of salt...”

—Jack Spicer, “Orfeo”

When Tiff refused to join Tisiphone, the Fury knocked her out and then carried her out of the theater. It felt like a completely unceremonious ending for most of the audience, but an ending none the less. So it was extremely startling to most of the audience when they exited Luma and the play was beginning again in the foyer, with the Furies as the set pieces of the house. The play then repeated three times and disappeared out of sight around the side of the Fisher Center. This symbolized many things for Mikey and I as writers. By ending with a cycle it made the audience question the true start of the piece; in part one, was Tiff already trapped in the cycle with the Furies? It was also a way to create true fear and terror, because we examined how to create a hell without any irony. What would it actually be to be stuck in Hell? What is a true punishment of Anger? The repetition and increasing urgency of each cycle made it feel like the scene (the worst moment of Tiff’s life) would eventually collapse into an infinitely repeating flash of pain and anger. This idea of a condensed fraction of time stretching out into infinity seemed to us to be both a true representation of a type of hell, and also a way to conceptualize the experience of being angry.

The cycles also made the play something challenging to forget as the audience left the theater. We did not want the audience to retain the safety of leaving the anger behind in the theater. On stage, we were acting for them. But by leaving the theater, we invaded their world: a reminder that anger permeates, that you carry it with you. To see Tiff living through Hell in the bright glare of daylight, in the open space of a lobby, makes the pain less beautiful or poetic, and more grotesque. Perhaps you want her to just say yes. You admire her for saying no. You are glad she’s maintaining her identity. You want her to admit what

she's feeling. Either way, the play is no longer just living in the comfortable darkness of a theater, but out in the world where *you* live. And if there is anything I hope to do as an artist, it is to ask questions in the theater that are taken out of the theater. I hope to make art that you cannot leave at the door when you go home.

**A NEW HYPOTHESIS or
Questions Born of Questions or
Flaws**

“Psychoanalysis gets interesting when it shifts the focus from making us more intelligible to ourselves to helping us become more curious about how strange we really are. And so, I would argue, does art.”
—Maggie Nelson, *“The Art of Cruelty”*

What did FURY teach me? What is the importance of Anger? What kind of projects come next? How do I make compassionate art? How do I learn when to fight and when to negotiate? How do I learn to filter advice? How do I reach as many people as I can? How do I make art that has an ethical process? How do I make money? How do I navigate the world as a queer, female artist? How do I navigate the world as an able-bodied, white, young, financially stable artist? How do I hear critique and decide what I find necessary to change, reevaluate, or shift? How do I make things that matter? How do I have fun? How do I support fellow artists? How do I not become callused, cynical, or afraid? How do I make art that begins to encapsulate the rich range of human emotion and experience? How do I not lose my instinct to question?

There are so many things I am working on within myself. And I hope that stays constant for me; I want to always question who I am, what I'm doing, and what I'm giving as a person and an artist. I do not want my conception of self or place to become static. Perhaps I can work toward an active equilibrium, like the body's constantly changing and self-balancing ecosystem. I want to keep my compassion from becoming paralysis. To keep my confidence from becoming arrogance. To keep discipline from becoming judgment. And while I know that I sometimes slide into the negative side of those dichotomies (as well

as many others, including hope/naivety, anger/blame), I hope to also find compassion for the flaws of myself and others. I am happy that I have no concrete solutions to these questions and that I am leaving Bard with excitement and curiosity. I believe that both life and art are better formed from questions than answers.

**REPORTING RESULTS or
A Manifesto or
The Importance of Being Earnest or
I Am Not Ashamed Of Hope**

“PEOPLE have been THINKING too long that ART is a PRIVILEGE of the MUSEUMS and the RICH. ART IS NOT BUSINESS! It does not belong to banks & fancy investors ART IS FOOD. You can’t EAT it BUT it FEEDS you. ART has to be CHEAP & available to EVERYBODY. It needs to be EVERYWHERE because it is the INSIDE of the WORLD. ART SOOTHES PAIN! Art wakes up sleepers! ART FIGHTS AGAINST WAR & STUPIDITY! ART SINGS HALLELUJA! ART IS FOR KITCHEN! ART IS LIKE GOOD BREAD! Art is like green trees! Art is like white clouds in blue sky! ART IS CHEAP! HURRAH!”
—Bread & Puppet Theater, The “Why Cheap Art” Manifesto

My family has moved a lot in my life. I have lived in some very liberal places and some very conservative places, and therefore I have seen a huge amount of different types anger within communities. Art is one of the few ways I have ever seen people from very different backgrounds find common ground, or at least a way to start a conversation. In the four years I have lived here, Bard has become my emotional and literal home. This place has given me the tools to go out into the world and create the kind of art I believe is necessary. If I had gone to a conservatory or a school where career track was the focus, I would not have the amazing tool kit I have now. I am so privileged to have attended a college that has taught me how to question, how to mobilize, how to love, and how to fight for the things I believe in. This department has made me able to be critical of myself and the world around me. You have given me the skills and language to stand up for myself and what I believe in. And that is one of the best things college has to offer.

I am scared to leave Bard. Of course I am. But I also feel prepared to leave. I think I am beginning to gain a stronger understanding of my strengths and weakness as a person and artist. Understanding my own shortcomings— and embracing them and my impotence as an artist— has actually made me so excited to leave the protective bubble of Bard. I have applied to a teaching job in Spain for the coming year in order to fling myself into a situation that forces me to define myself anew in a different country and culture. And whether or not I am accepted into the program, I leave Bard with the intention of finding ways to incorporate my self-critique and professorial criticism into my personal development. If Bard has done anything, it has taught me how to learn. I do not want to let this ability die after graduation; as the scientists in my life have taught me, the end of an experiment is another question.

I am excited to help foster communities that bring art to underserved communities and to create art that fights against injustice. And more than anything, I am proud that I have begun to find an artistic identity that refuses to be ashamed of hope and earnestness. I believe those tools are necessary to survive creating radical, thoughtful art. I have experienced the way in which those tools allow one to work and collaborate with people starkly different from one's self. My senior project was an amazing experience with a myriad of successes and setbacks, but in the long run, it was just one project in a long chain of projects. It helped me learn and grown, but hopefully all of my art will help me to do that. I hope to leave Bard, and work to become an artist that gives that same gift of to others. It is my duty as someone who has had the immense privilege of an expensive, private, liberal arts education, to take what I have learned here at Bard and share it as best as I can.

Any good manifesto is of such pure intent that it can never be fully realized, only reached for. So perhaps my manifesto would be: to create generous, community based, loving, dirty, beautiful, raw, holy, stupid, fun, magical, accessible, radical art that has the power to change politics and take hold of the human heart, and to create spaces and communities that help others to do the same.

LOVE CONTAINS SO MUCH ANGER:

An analysis of the Senior Theater Project Festival INFERNO

ANALYSING THE EVIDENCE or How Does One Change The System As They Leave It? or Comparative Logic Does Not Allow For Growth

“The curricula of all Bard programs are rooted in an allegiance to free speech, civility, dissent, and the traditions of scientific and speculative inquiry. Bard seeks to inspire disciplined skepticism and critical thinking.”

—Bard College Mission Statement

I want to break down my thoughts about the structure of theater senior projects, but it’s difficult to find a place to start. My issues with the structure and requirements of our senior projects have been difficult for me to articulate until recently, as I am just now completing the full process. The requirements for SPROJ also changed for my year, so all of us are working through issues new to the department. Simultaneously, these issues seem so petty in some lights; I have the immense privilege of going to a liberal arts college. I was given a budget for my senior project¹! The department helped my cast and I afford to put on my play, HOW TO EAT THE THING THAT EATS YOU in New York. I have had so many professors that have been so kind and nurturing while I have been here. I cannot help but feeling like I am so privileged that I have no right to complain.

Yet comparative logic only goes so far. The art world outside of Bard can be so hostile and competitive and capitalist. That doesn’t mean we should give up on making Bard better because it is comparatively a little less hostile, competitive, or capitalist. I have worked so diligently here at Bard. I truly believe I’ve worked to the best of my ability at this school. I want to articulate the things that I believe can be made better at Bard not because of false entitlement. And though my family is paying so much money to for me to be here— my father has joined the reserves and is deployed to Afghanistan, again, so I can afford this college education— I am not saying this from some misguided attempt to “get

¹ I said this to a photography friend who had to spend thousands of dollars on her SPROJ and she literally gasped with envy.

my money's worth." I want to articulate these thoughts because I care deeply about the Bard theater community and all it has given me. And as Bard has taught me how to handle and appreciate critique, I hope it can appreciate some in return.

In the Senior Project Preparation and Presentation Guidelines as distributed by Bard College, it states that students completing an installation or performance project should be expected to write a 1-2 page artist statement. The statement is intended to give a small amount of background, so that those seeing the piece have some sense of who the artist is and where they are coming from. The art is expected to stand on its own². We, as theater majors, are expected to write a 20 page paper about our process of creating a senior project³. This amount of pages seems to be a way to fill in the gaps left by an unfair project design. If music majors, studio arts majors, and photo majors are only expected to write an 1-2 page artist's statement for their year worth of work to be considered sufficient, it follows that something about the process of creating a theater senior project is insufficient. The fact that we must write 20 pages to complete our senior projects is one of the pieces of evidence that our SPROJ performance is inadequate as a measure of our individual efforts and strengths as fourth year Bard students.

In order to explain why the projects seem inadequate, I think it only makes sense to look at the structure of theater senior projects as a whole. As a senior project is supposedly a cumulation of 4 years of study, it will be challenging for me to talk about the project in isolation. Therefore, I will break the problems down into subcategories. This will allow me to be both compassionate and thorough in addressing the current shortcomings of the senior project design, as well as make sure that I only bring up issues or complaints that are directly pertinent to the success of a fourth year student in the completion of their project. I will attempt to address them with as much understanding and specificity as possible. I do

² This is not to imply there isn't reflection and critique on projects. All students go through a senior project board. Many divisions even have collaborative/group processing time to discuss one another's art. In the visual arts community here, each senior gets at least an hour of critique time on their project by their fellow students as well as the professors. This functions not only as a helpful tool to the seniors, but also a way for the professors to contextualize and better understand their notes to the student for when they hold the senior project board.

³ Dancers are also expected to write a 20-30 page paper.

not bring them up to rant or begrudge; I bring them up so that you have the perspective of someone who has just completed a project. I write this because I love this school so dearly and value this relationship enough to question the ways in which I have found it lacking.

**ANOTHER ASIDE or
Gratitude Is The Quality Of Being Thankful**

“Without realizing it, we continually put up protective walls made of opinions, prejudices, and strategies, barriers that are built on a deep fear of being hurt. These walls are further fortified by emotions of all kinds: anger, craving, indifference, jealousy, and arrogance. But fortunately for us, the soft spot — our innate ability to love and to care about things — is like a crack in these walls we erect. It’s a natural opening in the barriers we create when we’re afraid. With practice we can learn to find this opening. We can learn to seize that vulnerable moment.”

—Pema Chodron, “When Things Fall Apart”

Our department is amazing at bringing in artists that challenge the bounds of what theater can be. Our department is housed in a beautiful space: the architecture of the building is state of the art and inspiring, and the Hudson Valley provides an incredible creative community. Our department creates high tech, visually stunning shows. Our department is made up of brilliant people. Our department is constantly changing. Our department hires queer artists, female artists, artists of color, and artists who expand our perceptions of “who gets to be an artist.” Our department does not create the kind of education that will put us on a single track of how to succeed or make work. Our department leaves enough open space in our lives to allow us to create lots of independent art and work. Our department is less driven by competition and capitalism than many schools. Our department is housed in a facility that provides us with opportunities to see opera, dance, music, film, puppetry, and much more. Our department is interdisciplinary. Unlike many other departments, ours gives students funding for their SPROJ. Our department is filled with intense, passionate, smart students. Our department is unlike most any department at any other liberal arts school. That is to say, I am able to be a radical, queer, female, interdisciplinary theater maker that is not limited to studying only one facet of theater. This place has

helped me begin to find my artistic voice and has given me an amazing toolbox with which to approach the world. I am so lucky. I am still learning how to make art and have communications that are based both in softness and strength. And I believe the way I can be most helpful and true as I leave Bard is by giving you my experiences so that the program continues to improve for future students.

**DATA, pt. 1 or
Time**

“I CAN take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.”
—Peter Brook, “The Empty Space”

In my first semester at Bard, I took “Revolutions in Time and Space” with Gideon Lester. The class changed my life and my perceptions of the world. I remember carrying around Peter Brook’s “The Empty Space” like a paperback bible; it had finally given me words for so much of what I had seen, felt, and experienced within theaters my entire life. In the first few lines of the book, Brook explains that, for him, an act of theater can simply be a man walking across an empty space while someone watches him. This breaks theater into a few main parts: *time*, *space*, and *the artist*. I have seen theater in my time here at Bard that pushes the limits of Brook’s theories, but as a place to start when analyzing the basics of what it takes to make theater, Brook’s ideas have helped provide a good grounding for me. For this reason, I would like to use these elements to structure my thoughts about the current SPROJ process. By looking at the principles of time, space, and the artist, I have a formalist structure to back my criticisms that is based in the essential principles of theater. Therefore, I can keep my complaints grounded in my personal lived experiences of theater making at Bard, while making sure they are pertinent and theoretically sound⁴.

⁴ Part of what makes this essay a challenge is that I only have my own experiences to use as evidence. So not only do my complaints constitute a tiny sample population, I am also dealing partially with qualitative evidence. Theater is sometimes a thoroughly quantitative practice: money and time for example are quantifiable resources. But just as frequently, theater is extremely qualitative and based on community and relationships. I believe it is a futile task to describe personal experiences of community and relationships in an “unbiased” way; the very experience of having person to person experiences creates bias and to say you can write without a bias is careless and untrue. That said, I will do my best to explain my qualitative experiences rigorously, so that my bias is acknowledged and clear. I find that to be the best way to make meaningful changes based on explanations of personal experiences.

I'd like to begin with *time*, as it is the variable in theater that in some ways has the least variables possible within it. Space is vastly different for every show (ex: theater, country, set). Performer/audience/artist is different for every show (i.e. the limitless combinations of humans on the planet). Yet the only possible variable within time is its literal quantity; how long is the process, how long is an action, how long is a scene, how long is the show? In the theater project guidelines, time was broken for us into neat divisions. A year ago, when we Juniors were deciding the structure of the project, Matt Waldron gave us a sheet with the master list of technical due dates for the project. As someone designed a lot of artistic elements and run a decent amount of tech in my own shows, I completely understand the need for such dates. The set, props, light scheme, etc. all must have a date for finalization in order to be fair to the technical staff that makes a show possible. All of these dates made perfect sense to me, as a techie myself, but also in order to help keep us seniors on track in the creative process.

The time elements of senior Project that are not logical to me are the time requirements of the rehearsal process and of the performance. To qualify for working in Luma, our senior projects had to be 25 min long, and our performances had to be in February⁵. To give you a sense of why these requirements seem unfair and impractical to me, it's important to understand what most senior projects look like at Bard. All students start senior project in some form at the end of their junior year. This gives them time to propose an idea and have a whole summer to think, research, and give themselves the intellectual space to design their project. For most Bard seniors, the entirety of the fall semester and nearly the entire spring semester is dedicated to SPROJ. The earliest that any non theater, student completes a year long senior project is the first round of studio artists, who hang their installation mid

⁵ I should clarify; the projects could be longer than 25 minutes but we were told that the professors/our advisor would only watch a 25 min portion. We would only be graded on a 25 min piece but we could theoretically make the play itself as long as we wanted. Also, in order for the performances to be held in the Luma theater, the project had to be performed in February. It barely felt like a choice for me to perform in Luma. I have made or acted in literally a dozen plays in the Old Gym. With an incredible theater like Luma (the quality of theater I may never have access to again) available for my use as a student, it felt like I would be wasting an opportunity if I chose not to use it. Especially as a student who has never been cast in a department show, I didn't feel like performing anywhere else would begin to compare to the educational benefit of performing in a theater with professional space, technology, and people.

April. The music and dance majors on campus do have to perform in the fall, but that is because they complete two sections of their senior project. For example, a music major would have one concert in the late fall and one in the late spring, meaning that their full project isn't done until usually mid April or May. Having to perform in February means that we must complete our senior project two months before other students, which severely limits our rehearsal process time.

Non-theater students also have more flexibility with the time requirement of their project (not just the time given to them for the creative process). Literature students complete an average of 60-80 dense pages while many creative writing majors literally write hundreds of pages of text. For their boards to get through this material, it takes hours of reading. The music majors have two concerts throughout the year, each concert averaging at 1 hour of material. The studio arts and film majors are given a gallery space for between 2-3 weeks where their material is constantly on display. In fact, some studio arts majors include performance in their installations that can run for hours, or days on end, and is considered as part of their SPROJ. For many of these students, senior project is their first opportunity to create a full scale, professional quality piece of work in their field, and to truly test their limits.

Time: Process

The rehearsal process of the senior theater projects this year spanned from September, when we returned to school, to late February. If you take out the month and one half long break in December and January, that leaves 4 ½ months to write, cast, rehearse, and tech our senior projects. Theater is already an intensely time and location specific endeavor; unlike many other students in majors where solo work is the driving force behind the project, it was difficult for us to work on our projects over break since many of us didn't have access to our casts. On top of that, having the projects be collaborative meant that some of the work that would have been possible over breaks if it was a solo project was unable to happen, because even script writing couldn't be done individually within groups that decided upon equal

distribution of responsibilities. I understand that this struggle of collaborating and finding time is just one of the realities of theater; that is not the part that I take issue with. It is not the fact that we had to schedule and be good at time management that was frustrating to me. In fact, as a director for the past four years here, I've steadily been getting better at those skills and feel competent with them. The part that I am genuinely confused about is why the performances had to happen in February. Perhaps that decision was made to teach us a lesson about how theater works after Bard. Perhaps that decision was made so that seniors could both complete their SPROJ and also be part of a final department show. Perhaps it was so we could have over two months to write our twenty page papers. Whatever the reason, it does not seem to be in line with the standards of rest of the departments at Bard.

Having the performances just one month into the spring semester meant that we had only a month to make up for what we lost over break, rehearse, tech, and then perform. I understand that working within intense timeframes is a huge part of life as a theater artist. My professors have communicated that clearly to me. I certainly didn't mind the challenge of having a short amount of time to pull a lot of work together. In fact, senior project would have been a blast for me if we put on one short play at the end of every month. But there are a few reasons that, in the context of a senior project at Bard, this timeframe is not ideal. The first is fairness to our actors. Many of our actors are not only full-time students taking 16-20 credits, but non-theater majors as well. As a liberal arts institution, we are dedicated to the ideology of fostering well rounded citizens. Part of the beauty of Bard is that science students can learn art, art students can learn math, and so on. It discourages non-theater students from participating in the arts at Bard if being a part of a senior project takes over their schedule so completely. It is one thing to hold upperclassmen theater majors to these standards; getting used to working under pressure or working under timeframes can be a great thing for us. But as there are not enough upperclassmen theater students to fully cast all the senior projects, if we want to continue to encourage underclassmen and

non-theater students to participate in the explorative experience that is the liberal arts, we need to be more respectful of the time they have to give.

I also think that this time frame is simply out of line with the standards of the college. Taking two months of work time away from students that already have less time to work based on the very nature of their discipline seems thoughtless at best. As I said, college is a strange liminal time. We are straddling the world of adulthood and childhood. As professors you must find a balance in our lives as neither our parents nor our employers, which I'm sure is extraordinarily difficult. Yet I believe that, in some parts of the SPROJ portion of our education, the deadlines and time requirements expected of us, treat us more like professionals who have been hired by the department and less like students. Yes, there is great educational value in being shown how things will be when we enter the workforce. And while we as students are working our hardest to learn how to be professional, we are students (with students' schedules, commitments, and classes) first. And while I have had lots of flexibility outside the department in creating my own shows and lots of flexibility of time and deadline within my classes, I did not get that within senior project. Finding the space to learn and grow and even fail was challenging when we had 4 ½ months to write, cast, rehearse, and perform collaborative projects, while sharing actors, on top of being full time students.

Time: Performance

Last year, Jonathan Rosenberg said something interesting to me regarding the length of our senior projects. When confronted by frustrated students, he said "Well, it's difficult to even make 25 min of good art." And he is absolutely correct. Theater is hard and I am often merciless on my own projects. I am a fierce editor and critic of my art in all its forms. But to use the difficulty of creating good art as rational for the length of our projects is actually to coddle us and not give us room to learn. Making a long play interesting, successful, and meaningful is so hard. That is exactly why the theater faculty should be

willing to “count” longer pieces. This is not to say all students should have to make longer projects, but it should at least be an option. And while I know that this would make the time crunch I described in the previous section even more immediate, there are many ways to remedy that including (but not limited to) performances happening later in the year or actors only being allowed to be in one project. At the end of the day, I do not believe that 25 min is enough of a sample of our work for professors to understand our educational journey, and that the antidote for this shortcoming is not a 20 page paper but more viewership of our work.

As I just said, that viewership could take many forms. The main reason a 25 min project is insufficient as evidence of our work is that it is the only full-scale work some professors will see from a student. Some professors are fantastic about going to see student work outside of the Fisher Center, and some are not. I know so much of this is based on financial resources like a professor's ability to stay for another night up at Bard or their schedule's flexibility. The only work that professors are required to see are our moderation boards and our senior projects, 30 total min of work. If the length of senior project cannot be changed, then at least professors should be seeing more of our work. For those of us that are actors, we can be seen in department shows (but only if we are cast and only once a semester) or in the many student theater shows that happen every semester. For those of us that are directors, technical/artistic directors, or playwrights, the only way for the professors to see our work is by seeing more student theater, higher professor attendance at Zocalo, or creating more opportunities for students within the structure of Fisher Center shows.

I am not a professor and won't pretend to understand the complexity of of your scheduling/time commitments. Because of this, I do not have a neat, tidy solution for this conundrum of exposure to our work. All I know is that there must be some way (or many ways) for professors to have a more well rounded view of our work as artists. This paper can't even begin to scratch the surface of the artistic design, or costuming, or writing, or producing I've done at Bard, and my senior project performance was

just one example of how I can perform, what I can create, and how I think. There must be ways for me to show you more of my work and *growth* as a student than my 25 min SPROJ. There must be ways to bring more student performances, artists, and work into the Fisher Center and/or bring professors to performances outside of the Fisher Center. Which brings me to my second issue with the senior project structure: space.

**DATA, pt. 2 or
Space**

“You cannot create results. You can only create conditions in which something might happen.”
—Anne Bogart

When Gideon Lester and I had a meeting a few weeks ago about some critical work I made about the Fisher Center, he brought up a lot of really helpful points and new perspectives for me to think about. There are certain things he and I don't see eye to eye on, but that's part of why the meeting was so useful. That meeting has really aided in my self reflection as I prep to leave this institution that bizarrely also doubles as my home. One of the small things he said in passing that really stuck with me was that the Fisher Center has cost over \$80 million dollars that is still being paid off⁶. The Fisher Center is the home of our department and we cannot help but be affected by the finances and therefore the space of the building.

As Leon Botstein says in the video on the “Our History” page of the Fisher Center's Website, “We were looking to create an international destination point in the arts [when creating the Fisher Center.]” And the center is certainly that. The space holds state of the art theaters. The facilities are beautiful and conducive to learning. The building itself is an architectural masterwork. Yet between its use by Live Arts Bard, the Orchestra Now, the Theater & Performance program, the Dance program, and the myriad of other projects and performances that happen in the Fisher Center throughout the year, there

⁶ The brochures I distribute at my job at the Production Office membership table has the wrong information; it says the Fisher Center cost over \$62 million dollars!

is simply a lack of space. There are two theater studios that must be split between all student theater rehearsals, department show rehearsals, and senior project rehearsals, as well as Live Arts Bard rehearsals (and sometimes performances), and almost all of the theater classes.

As Gideon said, the building cost exorbitant amounts of money. But as Leon said, it was made to be a destination and not, necessarily, to be practical. The department is in a thoroughly tricky situation. With only two studios and one theater, dividing resources equitably must be nightmarish. If the building is still being paid off, it probably means that student shows at the Fisher Center are not feasible to have frequently; student shows pull in very little revenue as they are attended by fellow students and not by wealthier Hudson Valley inhabitants. Also, bringing in Live Arts Bard Shows supports both avant garde and non-traditional artists and provides the student body with access to amazing art without having the expense of travel (that many of us cannot afford). This is one of the blessings of Bard: arts exposure without living in a metropolis.

But the current space arrangement makes it so that students are having to scrounge most of the time in order to find rehearsal space. The Old Gym, the only theater performance space on campus not housed in the Fisher Center, is on its last financial and scheduling leg. There is a show in the Old Gym every week of every semester. It is the only current place to perform out of the Fisher Center if the project requires some of the basic principles of modern theater (a sound booth for example). So the Old Gym has no ability to provide rehearsal space for students, only a week to complete dress/tech/performances. Olin (the humanities building) and the Multipurpose Room (a large space in the campus center) are frequently used by students as rehearsal spaces. But these spaces also provide huge limitations. Olin rooms are almost all tiny, with carpeted floors and low ceilings. The MPR is in high demand as a space utilized by almost every club and even group on campus. So at the end of the day, seniors looking for a place to rehearse are left with very few options.

I am very aware that this is something the department has neither designed on purpose, nor has much control over. You even do our best to guarantee us some space; each SPROJ group received three hours a week of guaranteed studio time. But three hours a week, especially with a shortened rehearsal process considering the February performance, is not enough space for us to rehearse effectively. Not receiving the Fisher center schedule until the day before some rehearsals means that we are unable to effectively call our casts to the right location, and provide them with the stability and information they deserve as our actors. And only being able to direct in Luma for our SPROJ shows (as opposed to the dance students who use it for moderation and two SPROJ performances) is just another indicator of the ways in which theater students have severely limited access to the facility. The building we are housed in may be an “international destination” but it simply doesn’t have the resources to provide for over 20 graduating seniors and all the other theater student and performance needs of our school.

If there is a way for me as a student to be helpful in changing this situation for future students, please let me know. I would be so happy to write a letter to the trustees explaining the student need for more studios, or create a student petition to send to the administration, or any other solution you can think of. I know this would be only one tiny action, but perhaps it would one part of a long term conversation with them about the need for more student space. Because the Fisher Center is such an amazing space, it is drawing more and more theater students every year. And if the senior class is steadily growing— and the rehearsal and performance space is already limited— I think it is important to begin thinking about ways to make sure theater students get access to good rehearsal space. This would allow for the next generation of Bardians to not only have the space to learn about theater in the classroom, but absorb and understand what they are taught by being able to rehearse in studios outside of class.

**DATA, pt. 3 or
The Artist/Performer/Audience**

“I have to learn alone/ to turn my body without force/ in the deep element.”
—Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck”

Part of the beauty of the senior project at Bard is the ability for a student to graduate with their name on a full scale, professional piece of work. Instead of being in the footnotes of some graduate student’s research paper, we theoretically get to leave Bard with a solo project entirely of our own devising and creation. And while it’s nearly impossible to create a theater piece truly alone, I can’t help but feel jealous of the non-theater seniors who got to create a senior project that was truly only theirs. Part of the reason Mikey and my partnership worked so well was that we really attempted to give up control to the other; we became good at not forcing the project to look like how just one of us expected it to be. A fully functional collaborative process between directors means that the directorial voice becomes neither of theirs, but a synthesis between the two of them. In this way, it feels wrong to call my senior project, *mine*. It was, and is, *ours*. In fact, much of the inspiration and structure of the piece came from the diligence and brilliance of Mikey’s brain and research⁷.

I do not think it fair or in line with the standards of the college to deny seniors full use of the resources and facilities of a department unless the seniors collaborate. I have not been told the rationale behind this shift in requirements, so I will not presume to know why the rules were changed. If having collaborative projects makes things easier on the department in some way, so be it. But collaborative projects should not be incentivised with access to Luma. Perhaps collaborative projects could be allowed to be longer plays and be performed in February, while solo projects could be two, 30 min projects produced in December and April. Perhaps there could be a funding incentive attached to a collaborative project. Perhaps collaborative projects could be afforded more guaranteed rehearsal space. But making a

⁷ The idea of working with The Furies and naturalist “young angry men” theater came directly from Mikey. Though I know she sees herself primarily as a performer, her thorough and dedicated research abilities lent her so well to the role of dramaturg, stage manager, and director.

theater student choose between their one opportunity to direct a show in Luma, and having a solo theater project like the rest of Bard, does not reflect the community and equality based mentality I see in so many other ways within our department. Theater majors should be both allowed to learn from working in a professional theater, while also fulfilling the larger, institutional definition of a senior project: “an original, *individual*, focused project growing out of the student’s cumulative academic experiences.

**EXTERNAL REVIEW or
Thank You**

“I have learned now that while those who speak about one's miseries usually hurt, those who keep silence hurt more.”

—C.S. Lewis

As it is one of my biggest dreams to someday own a community based performing arts space or to run a theater troupe, I genuinely want to hear your feedback and thoughts about this process. I don’t know what it is like to be in a position of power in an institution, nor do I understand yet how to lead an arts community. If I am to someday be a leader for others, I’d love to know the process by which you make decisions at Bard. I understand that my perspective of this department is very narrow. I am both constrained by my status as a student and my short historical perspective— I only have four years worth of experience of the Bard community— so I welcome thoughts you as my board may have about the parts of the puzzle I am not seeing. That said, I believe my perspective holds some merit even though it is limited. I know that I always want to hear from my cast members, because their experience of a rehearsal process can be very different from mine (as I am the person in a position of power). So I hope these critiques I bring up can serve as a way to help us have a conversation about how I can become a better and more nuanced thinker, artist, and leader. I hope they can also help you (as the department) have a conversation about my experiences as a student.

I truly appreciate it that you read this portion of the essay. It was so important to me to write a paper that I worked hard on and was excited about. As this paper was a “process paper,” I found it

essential to include one of the defining experiences of the process: my thoughts about the guidelines of the project. By writing them out, I was able to find purpose and truth in the creation of the essay; leaving things unsaid would have made for a dishonest paper. It was by writing something that both addressed what I loved about the process, and struggled with during the process, that I actually was able to address some of the complicated and nuanced nature of my relationship with Bard.

Thank you to all three of you for being on my board and going through one of my final moments of school with me. I look forward to your thoughts on my art, my writing, and what happens from here, as well as your take on the ways I can continue to grow as a person and as a theater maker.

Thank you! Goodbye! Hurrah!